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BACK TO PREVENTION

by Karen Burbach

THE PUSH FOR PRIMARY CARE

Americans spend more on health care than any other country in the world.

Yet, we don't live longer and we die more often from heart disease, stroke, cancer and diabetes.

Each of these diseases is preventable in a health care system attuned to a primary care model that emphasizes health promotion.

"Most people do not need specialty care for the majority of their medical problems," said Michael Sitorius, M.D., chairman of the UNMC Department of Family Medicine. "But, they do need, regardless of age, someone who delivers their primary care."

UNMC leaders know — and research shows — primary care leads to healthier citizens and communities and lower costs of care — the principal goals of health care reform.

Ranked as one of the leading institutions in the training of primary care professionals, UNMC has long valued a strong primary care program. Now, it is strategically poised to create a Primary Care Center to improve the education

of its students and spark new interdisciplinary patient care and research programs.

The Affordable Care Act, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Obama in March 2010, will expand health insurance coverage to 32 million Americans and greatly increase the need for primary care.

Fifty-one of the 93 counties in Nebraska already have a shortage of primary care providers.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) defines primary care as "the provision of integrated, accessible health care services by clinicians who are accountable for addressing a large majority of personal health care needs, developing a sustained partnership with patients, and practicing in the context of family and community."

Primary care, traditionally, has been associated with family physicians and

general internal medicine, pediatricians and gynecologists, but has expanded over several years. With health care reform, the field now includes pharmacists, allied health professionals, public health officials, high-level nurses and other professions.

Primary care is the "logical foundation for an effective health care system," says the IOM, emphasizing the notion that the role is not captured by any single specialty.

The health care team is like members of an orchestra, said Carl Smith, M.D., professor and chairman of the department of obstetrics and gynecology. "Patients need someone, like the primary care provider, to conduct the orchestra or they have fragmented care."

America's health care system, however, is focused more on delivering treatment than promoting wellness and prevention. Signs of a treatment-based system abound in the number of students entering specialty care, financial incentives that lure them and the level of attention given to the latest whiz-bang

treatments. “Trying to find ways to raise money for primary care is really hard to do because it’s not high profile,” Dr. Sitorius said.

“Primary care is altruism at its peak.”

UNMC has long been a leader in primary care and consistently ranks among the nation’s top graduate schools in the annual U.S. News & World Report rankings — most recently lauded for its seventh place ranking.

“We have a long-standing commitment to training health care professionals for all of Nebraska,” said Dr. Sitorius, who leads UNMC’s efforts to develop a comprehensive center for primary care. “It’s part of the institutional mission.”

UNMC’s strength in primary care stretches across disciplines.

Faculty members who train in primary care in the Colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Public Health and the School of Allied Health Professions collaborate with one another, as well as with private practice colleagues, many of whom are alumni. “This is critical to the breadth of our primary care exposure and education,” Dr. Sitorius said.

Primary care at UNMC is valued and respected — not necessarily the case elsewhere — and role models can be found in all disciplines. “The clinicians we have are skilled and respected by the specialty services,” Dr. Smith said. “You can’t buy that kind of talent — you have to develop it.”

Nationally known programs, such as the College of Medicine’s Rural Training Track program, train family physicians in small, underserved rural communities on the principles of rural care. The program — one of the most extensive in the country — is based on the concept that residents tend to practice within 100 miles of where they train. As a result, family practice residents train at such key sites as Scottsbluff, North Platte, Kearney, Grand Island and Norfolk.

Strong pharmacy and nurse practitioner programs, nationally recognized physician

assistant and physical therapy programs, a new community-oriented primary care certificate program (only the second in the country and offered through the College of Public Health) and nursing divisions across the state further bolster UNMC’s commitment to primary care.

In addition, UNMC internal medicine residents train in the UNMC Physicians Midtown Clinic, which has adopted the innovative primary care medical home concept. Instead of brief encounters with their doctors, patients may see a team of providers including nurse coordinators, social workers, diabetes educators, a psychologist, registered nurse, licensed practical nurse, X-ray technician and pharmacist.

“It’s one of the most unique continuity clinics for residents in the country,” said Lynell Klassen, M.D., professor and chairman of the department of internal medicine.

Everyone agrees the Affordable Care Act will greatly increase the need for primary care in the United States, as well as create incentives to change our primary care delivery model.

“Our health care system is unsustainable,” said Sarah Thompson, Ph.D., Niedfelt Distinguished Professor and associate dean of academic programs in the College of Nursing. “We have a system that pays for acute care.”

Primary care is not reimbursed at the rate of specialty care and financial discrepancies between specialty and primary care make it challenging to recruit students, particularly when they’ve amassed large amounts of debt.

“Medicine’s reward structure is for doing procedures and office visits,” Dr. Smith said. “It’s not about rewarding primary care docs for managing the health of a population.”

The United States spends more on health care than any other country in the world, but has higher rates of infant mortality, diabetes and other ills than many other developed countries.

Kyle Meyer, Ph.D., senior associate dean for allied health, says a long-term solution to the shortage of primary care providers should involve utilizing all qualified health care professionals. “More primary care physicians are necessary, however, we need to engage all of the health professions involved in delivering primary care in a dialogue about how they can effectively work together to improve access and quality for patients.”

Physician assistants, nurse practitioners and other primary care health professionals supplement the care provided by primary care physicians, Dr. Meyer said. “In recent years, the number of non-physicians entering primary care has grown faster than the number of physicians entering primary care.”

Although still evolving, Dr. Sitorius envisions a Primary Care Center at UNMC where practitioners build on their existing strengths, work together on novel approaches that use interprofessional teams, provide integrated care for those with chronic illness and implement the medical home concept — a team-based approach that focuses on prevention and disease management.

“We want to be at the forefront of innovation in health care delivery and education, as well as address the need for more and broader health care availability,” Dr. Sitorius said.

To do that, UNMC leaders will determine what type of education and training is needed to ensure the best primary care for all Nebraskans.

“Thanks to technological advances, we can really go to battle on a disease,” Dr. Thompson said. “But to truly make a difference in the quality of peoples’ lives and to save money we must look to primary care health promotion and stop these illnesses before they start.” 